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ABSTRACT

Gay students need and deserve to have teachers (gay or nongay) who will both show them creative, nonneurotic ways of channeling their talents and energies and join in the battle against the ignorance that makes gay people such ready prey to nongay predators. As may be seen from three papers written in a teachers' workshop class on the topic "When I Discover That My Child is Gay," there is much that teachers can learn from students and much that they must learn about the adult dimensions possible for their students if these students are to be educated. For the English teacher, literature offers many opportunities for seriously acknowledging the gay parameters in the world. (JM)

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THE FAGGOT IN THE WOODPILE: TEACHING GAY STUDENTS

by Louie Crew, dd

Every teacher teaches many Gay students. If stingiest of straight estimates are to be trusted, about one out of every 20-25 persons in the United States is predominantly homosexual in orientation. These estimates put at least one Gay student in almost every English class and one Gay teacher in every twentieth English class, not to mention those students and teachers who are drawn to Gay experience for ten, twenty, thirty or forty percent of their erotic and attendant needs.

I believe that you should teach Gay students the way that you should teach all other students, viz., that unless you are some kind of sadist, you teach students to survive and to thrive as who they are, not as who they are not, and to thrive in this culture rather than in some other. How you teach anyone or any skill is an immensely personal question. Because teaching is immensely personal, I would like to put you on the Gay learner's side for a moment as I share with you three teachers' spontaneous efforts to teach Gay students. The teachers in this instance are students in a composition workshop [a Rising Junior workshop, to use the jargon of the Georgia Regents] at my college.

As one of about thirty routine daily compositions in the workshop, I set my students the topic "When I Discover That My Child Is Gay." I had not had so much consternation from an assignment since 1959 when at

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Auburn University I had set my students the topic "If I Were a Negro." When I drew this parallel, my now all-Black class at Fort Valley State College took the challenge and responded with very feelingful papers that ran a full range of the possible responses, complimenting me by showing me that they were not afraid to express open hostility to an experience that they know to be mine. As I read three very different papers from this group, I challenge you to put yourself in the place of the Gay children being thus discovered by their parents or teachers. Which adults seem most qualified to help you thrive as who you are in this world?

ACCEPTISM

When my son is born gay, I'll protest and try to reason with him once I find out. I'll probably curse him out, or even to a point, put him out. In the end, I'll have to learn to accept him.

First I'll think about what could have happened to make him want to appeal to his own sex for love and affection rather than to the opposite sex. It could very well have been something I did to make him feel rejected or not wanted. Since mothers are the first people babies come in contact with, I could have done something to to him to make him reject or not love women affectionately. I'll have to re-examine myself and my teachings.

If I try to change him, it would only make him reject or lose out with me completely. Sometimes a person may go gay because he feels he needs some other kind of experience to fulfill the one he isn't getting.

When my son is twenty months old, if I discover within the next two to four months that he's on his way to becoming gay, I'll re-focus my teachings and the general way I relate to him and go a different route.

Some people tend to think that being or becoming a homosexual is caused by some physical defect. I think it's psychological, because the person probably wants to escape into another world, and being Gay is his world and he's happy in it.

If my son was born gay, I would protest, try to change it, but eventually I would accept the fact that he's Gay and would accept him. He will always be my son.

Notice how this teacher never views the world from her son's perspective. His Gay world which he perceives quite naturally, she perceives as a world to which he "wants to escape." What kind of telling behavior will she spot to identify her son as Gay between 20-24 months old!? What self-concepts will you her Gay child inherit from her guilt? After all the fuss and protest she goes through in trying to accept you, might your most dangerous move be to accept her or to accept her view of you? What great blessing is supposed to accrue from the resignation "he will always be my son"? Is "Acceptism," the student's very appropriate neologism, encouragement for any kind of thriving?

Consider a paper very different:

MY SON WAS BORN GAY

When my son was born Gay it was a complete shock to my entire family. I didn't try to make him keep his true identity a secret because of two

main reasons.

One, if I would try to make my son act as all straight men do, I would be harming him more in the long run than I would if I let him grow up with his identity in the open. For example, if my son grew up acting in a way that would let people know that he was Gay and that he was proud of it, people would more or less become accustomed to him and to his actions. On the other hand, if he was in the closet, when people finally found out, it would shock them more and their feelings towards him wouldn't make him feel comfortable.

Two, if my son was in a situation where he would have to change what he likes, to keep society from looking down on him, he might as well be dead. I say this because this life is what you make it, and by never being his real self he would in a sense never have lived.

In conclusion, I say that merely because a person is not born thinking, acting, and looking the way that I do does not make that person inferior to me. This thing about inferiority has gotten this world into so much confusion that it might make people do themselves in.

--Porter Garner (cited with his permission and approval)

The paper speaks with a maturity that recommends it to all teachers. Clearly as the Gay child--or even as the nonGay child--of this parent, you would have the advantage of love and security to prepare you well for thriving as you are in this world, even the freedom to discover who you are before being plummeted from the nest with parental guilt and anxiety. [Interestingly too to all English teachers is the fact that the Regents Testers in Georgia have repeatedly found both of these students to be "illiterate"!]

A third paper which I would like to share was written by a student in the class who was very involved in a secret Gay experience at the time. His is for me the most troubling of the three papers. The student did not know that I knew him to be involved in the Gay experience. I knew accidentally, because his boyfriend had long sought counsel from my husband and me about problems in their relationship. The writer of this composition while regularly making love with his boyfriend and encouraging his boyfriend to make very lavish gifts to him in private, publicly often refuses even to speak to his boyfriend and often makes crude remarks about him in his presence in public. Neither is publicly identified as Gay. Here then is a paper written in the very clothes his lover had bought for the writer:

IF MY SON IS BORN GAY

When and if I find that my son is gay, I will try very hard, in all ways, to convert him. I will make him fight anyone who tries to push him around. He will go to, watch, and play all kinds of sports. I will even try to pick his friends.

I will really fault myself if my son is born gay. I probably will think that I haven't taken up enough time with him. I will feel that I should have carried him out with me instead of leaving him home with his mother.

But if none of these things work, I will just give up and let him be himself, to an extent. He wouldn't be having dates with guys, unless I didn't know anything about it. He wouldn't be wearing girls' clothing. He wouldn't be wearing any kind of makeup. He would only just be himself.

You do not have to be a trained psychologist to see the self-loathing and projection going on here; and you do not have to be an actor to experience the distortions that will be experienced by the Gay child unlucky enough to have this man for a father.

There is much that teachers can learn from students and much that nonGay people can learn from having the "grace to see ourselves as Gay people see us."

As a Gay educator I would go still further than these papers have suggested. I would say that most educators really interested in their students demonstrate that interest by making themselves informed about at least the adult dimensions possible for their students. How can you lead out students, educate them, into a world which you do not even know? Yet daily most teachers try to teach Gay students to thrive without the teachers' even knowing the Gay parameters of the world in which we all live.

At the moment I am not suggesting that we should all leave our campuses and go to study Gay bars or Gay churches, or the like. Of course such visitations could be extremely instructive for sensitive observers. Certainly books are a very limited substitute for studying "foreign" experience, particularly taboo experience, because the taboos that affect the experience typically affect all presentations of that experience in books, on television, and in the movies. Gay writers are regularly rewarded either for masking their experience as nonGay or for telling of it as Gay but in terms that reassure nonGays in their condemnation of the Gay Experience. The major way vicarious media distort is by ignoring Gay experience altogether, by doing what most of you do in your classrooms all of the time, by talking always as if everyone shares your nonGay orientation and is looking forward to a family with kids,

and identifies with several nonGay concerns like abortion, orphanages, overpopulation, adultery, heterosexual courtship, and the like, all of which make up much of the content of our literature. Yet, with all ~~of your~~ standard notions to the contrary notwithstanding, I am not like nonGay readers, at least not in several registers, many of which are not specifically sexual. Any teaching which denies or ignores my differences fails by that ignorance to educate me, to lead me out into a full awareness of my own potentials for thriving as I am in this world.

Instead of urging teachers and parents to come into the Gay world, I am urging you to acknowledge the Gay parameters already in your own world, and asking that these Gay dimensions be treated seriously, lovingly.

The literature that you are already teaching offers many opportunities for such acknowledgement. Everyone here has at least once taught The Scarlet Letter, and I hope that no one failed to discuss in detail the taboo of adultery which is at the heart of the book. Certainly anyone sensitive to the Gay Experience of taboo recognizes some strong parallels in the health and guiltlessness that decloseted and vulnerable Hester experiences in contrast to the psychic destruction and sense of sin that closeted Arthur experiences, both in response to the same adulterous act. Already some Gays, like Hester, have turned our scarlet "Q"s from "Queer" into "Queen" as an ameliorative linguistic thrust; and any sensitive lexographer, of which there seem to be precious few, must now record that in the experience of increasing numbers of us gay no longer means "dissolute" (American Heritage Dictionary), "giddy," or any of the other negative associations that nonGays have with the word we have forcefully elected as our own name for ourselves.

Yet how many teachers will admit Gay insight openly into the classroom discussions of books like The Scarlet Letter, much less allow Gay students the prerogative of using our own language? How many teachers create a climate of academic inquiry where one would even want to share insight? When was the last time we heard "Eureka!" in the academy? I have the feelings that libraries would fall tumbling down if anyone were to make a joyful discovery in them anymore.

I remind you that the kinds of Gay discovery that I am discussing will not mean the bringing of greater looseness into academic discussions. I am not urging (even if maybe I should) teachers to ~~discuss in~~ use any more explicit detail than they already employ for heterosexual reality. I do not normally take it that a nonGay has performed a sex act in class when citing her role as mother or father. When I refer to my husband I am making a standard reference with no specifically genital or political detail. If you see genitals or hear politics, those are your problems. I simply cannot take responsibility for having named the unspeakable orgies that go on in nonGay heads. My husband and I and all of your Gay students are going to need to be especially strong to survive such distortions.

I would hope that no one would pity Gay students or go especially easy on them. In loving ways I would hope that strong teachers, nonGay and Gay alike, would seize upon the already heightened sensitivity of most Gay students and show them creative, non-neurotic ways to channel talents and energies, while at the same time joining in the battle against the ignorance that makes Gays, especially younger Gays, such ready prey to nonGay predators. I would hope that nonGays adults would grow up to realize

that Gays often have their greatest persecution at home, by just such parents as we have earlier described; and I would hope that seeing this lack of "Gay family," understanding nonGays would work to create freer structures in which young Gays could meet other Gays, particularly Gay professionals and adults who demonstrate what otherwise they have never been allowed to see, viz., that Gay people can and do thrive, even in the open and even facing some rather incredible forms of persecution. I would hope too that teachers would be more in touch with Gay history and Gay literature and able to talk more comfortably about them in all standard courses, where they really belong if those courses are to be complete and honest.

The most meaningful letter of the scores that I have received about the special College English issue which I co-edited with Rictor Norton on The Homosexual Imaganation (Nov., 74, Vol. 36, no. 3) is from a mother of a Gay teenager, thanking us for giving her more ammunition to help her help her son in his important battle for survival. Would that all Gay youngsters were so fortunate as to have such understanding and support!

Last week in our student center at Fort Valley State College a very troubled Gay first-year student sat next to me and whispered: "Girl, let me tell you what awful happened to me last week," he said. "Sure, dear," I comforted. "I was on the line for a fraternity and missed one meeting. When I came the next day they said,'We had to work; don't you think you should have to work too?' 'Sure,' I said; 'you ran a mile; I'll even run two miles.' 'No,' they said; 'you're going to perform fellatio on all thirteen of us.'"

"You didn't let them get away with it!" I interrupted.

"But they wouldn't let me in their fraternity!" he moaned.

"But they weren't going to let you in the fraternity anyway, don't you see! And that's not a fraternity worth being in! They don't know the meaning of the word!" I urged.

"Oh, they would have let me in if I had done so," he replied, "only they would have had something on me and would have used me more. It's just not a sissy's world; now I am in nobody's group."

No amount of protest to remove that fraternity from our college --a protest that he does not want, as it would make him even more vulnerable-- will remove this brilliant young man's problem. His parents refuse to see that he's Gay and he knows that they are horrified that he even MIGHT be. Many Gay students perceive him to be weaker than they can risk being around. His college, his church, and his town provide only the most sordid conditions in which he can meet others who share his biological urges and try to build complete, as opposed to merely biological relationships. Efforts even to get a room for a group of Gay students to use in meeting to discuss such problems have been thwarted with great shows of administrative power at the College and at a nearby church, which offers its facilities to all other secular groups requesting the use of them....

Clearly this young man needs to learn that there are persons, Gay persons, who can reciprocate his affection in full-dimensional relationships, and he deserves the same institutional supports routinely provided for nonGays passing through the crucial period of growing up and learning to reach out to others. Some require dances. Some use Church occasions, or picnics, or hayrides. Some require marriage-counseling (or in Gay terms, lover-counseling). Surely all are well served by a fair and complete range of presentation of their experience in literature, the movies, and on television. When was the

time that you have ever seen something so innocuous as a goodbye kiss by a same-sex couple when one is leaving for work? Believe me, such small moments of love and support happen all the time and in your world; and I cannot believe that you or anyone else needs to be protected from this kind of reality.

Certainly as disturbing, if not even more so, are the perverted notions of human relations held by the thirteen self-styled nonGays who brutalized the young man on this occasion. I am wondering what sort of sharing they would be able to bring even to a heterosexual relationship. I must admit that I suspect that they are beyond redemption, certainly from a Gay point of view. Perhaps the one positive thing of this experience for the student, and it was slim pickings indeed, was that he could sit down with a Gay professor whom he respected, who had known some of the same rejection, and say, "Hey, girl..." and spill out his heart. Clearly he is going to need more internal strength and support to compensate for the lack of structure elsewhere if he is to thrive as who he is. I would like to think that all Gays are stronger than all nonGays precisely because we face more rigorous challenges requiring our independence; but I fear that the sad truth is that more are crushed than are proved strong by the harsh realities Gays face in coming up against persecution from straights.

Hopefully most people now know that you indeed work with many Gays who have met just such severe intimidation and have later become, in diverse ways, strong, mature, and productive adults. If you do not know these Gays in your midst, it is only because you have not made your midst a safe place for them to share these victories. Hopefully too most people now know that the Gay community is far more diverse than most of our stereotypes admit.

Yet I know that everytime I write or speak about the Gay experience I have in my audience some for whom this is their first experience knowingly confronting Gay people and Gay points of view. I tremble lest anyone assume that I could or would want to represent all Gay people and all Gay experience. Even we Gay people reflect this fear of someone else speaking for us more vengefully than do nonGays: "Lord, I hope people won't think he's describing me!" thinks [right now] the closeted chairperson near the back of the room here! And of course I am not describing her.

I have spoken more about the problems of teaching Gay students than I have about the solutions to those problems, because I know the problems better than I know solutions. Also, I feel that people usually have a harder time acknowledging the problems than they have in discovering solutions. The ~~young~~ student ~~paper~~/~~who~~ who warmly accepted the Gay son tends to support my faith that people can come to solutions often merely by defining a problem as a problem. The biggest problems that we Gays face are nonGay people, particularly your fears of us. The fact that at last, in 1975, as your colleague I am allowed to say that, gives me hope that you as teachers can facillitate our mutual discovery of solutions.

In the past Gays have learned to survive only by pretense and by subterfuge, at a sacrifice much too grave and unjust, not only to ~~themselves~~ ourselves but to ~~their~~ our families and culture whom ~~they~~ we might more richly have served. Today we ask to be allowed, even taught, to thrive as we are in the world where we are a very large and important minority.